Shin Mune

“Finally, the day we received news of President Reagan signing the apology letter they had a function at the Issei Memorial building. And Papa was the only Issei there. I was so proud of him.”

Shin Mune is one of those rare living treasures in San Jose who come from the heritage of farming the very land upon which sprawling suburbias now sit. In fact, the 20-acre Mune farm that the family owned after the war was just a five minute walk away from the middle school that I attended, Morrill Middle on the border of Milpitas. Shin's father and brothers had a knack for farming, and they excelled especially in growing tomatoes, as working the land seemed to be ingrained in their heritage. "Back then, all the Japanese immigrants were either farm workers or farm owners. My father must have worked for somebody during the time he was trying to get started as a farmer, but he wanted to be his own boss." Shin speaks with a fondness and admiration of his first generation father to this day, recalling how he took him to the redress ceremony in San Jose's Japantown after the Civil Liberties Act was signed, and remarkably, he was only Issei in attendance.

Though Shin knew that most fathers during that time wanted their sons to be white-collar professionals as opposed to farm laborers, Shin followed his family into the business. "I went one year to Berkeley, but I just didn't like being a civil engineer. I wanted to then sort of be a farmer, but farming was a hard life." But he also made seeing the world a priority, and differed from his siblings in his desire to experience different lives and cultures. After our interview, Shin shared how the business of farming often took him to Mexico, allowing him to learn conversational Spanish. Shin and the Mune name remain closely tied to the Japanese American Museum of San Jose, as

Mune Farms was the sponsor for several rotating exhibits, in honor of Shin's brother, Kin, who passed in 2019. "We sponsored this [as a way] to honor my brother because without him, you know, everybody left the farm."

My name is Shin Mune. I was born on April 27, 1937 in Santa Barbara, California. I was the oldest. I had a sister who was next to me and then Kin, a true farmer. And then Gene. So there were four of us. All born within a five and a half year period. So my mother had quite a hard life in camp.

Where were your parents from in Japan and what were their names?

My father's first name was Tokutaro, and my mother was Sasako. Nakanishi was the maiden name. They were from Wakayama. My mother came at eight years old with their mother and older sister. Her father had come here first with the oldest son. But my mother and her mother were taking care of my mother's grandmother. So that's why they couldn't come. I believe that story — I sort of got it second hand, but I've gone to the gravesite where her grandmother was buried. That's in Wakayama. I've gone pretty often to Wakayama. Mostly it was my father's relatives that I stayed with, who have come to visit us here. So I was always welcome at their place.

Your mother was a young Issei when she came. Was she fluent in English?

Well, she learned English. She started third grade and she made a comment that was the hardest class that she's ever entered because she had to learn English almost quickly. All they did was speak Japanese at home. And then she had never learned to read or write Japanese because I don't know if she went to school.

How did your parents meet?

I don't think they knew each other in Wakayama while they were growing up. My father came at 14 years old. My grandfather had come earlier, but my father wanted to stay back and finish junior high school or go through

another five years of schooling. He became very proficient in letter writing. He loved to write letters all in Japanese. I don't think there was another letter writer like him. He would buy the *Nichi Bei Times*, subscribed to it. And he was a well-learned man reading the *Nichi Bei Times* daily back then. And then there was always an English section. So I've always enjoyed reading newspapers.

And my mother, because she was educated completely here in America, she subscribed to the San Jose afternoon newspaper. They had a morning and afternoon. So was either *San Jose Mercury* in the morning, or *San Jose News* in the afternoon. So we got the newspaper every day and we all as children became avid newspaper readers. And I can't think of another Issei lady who subscribed to the newspapers. Mama couldn't read Japanese, so Papa would get the *Nichi Bei Times*.

What did they do for work before the war?

Well, my mother settled in Menlo Park and they started a nursery. So in that area — Redwood City, East Palo Alto, Palo Alto, Menlo Park — there were I would say 30, 40 Japanese flower growers and they would grow carnations or mostly chrysanthemums in what were called these cheesecloth" houses. They weren't glass, but they weren't full plastic either. They were cheesecloth. It was thick enough to keep the warmth of the night after the sun went down. But also they could open it and let the flowers grow in the full flare of the sunlight.

So they were nursery owners.

My mother's side. And my father came here. And because back then, all the Japanese immigrants were either farm workers or farm owners. My father must have worked for somebody during the time he was trying to get started as a farmer, but he wanted to be his own boss.

Were your father's parents farmers when they came?

My grandfather was already farming. My father stayed back. But my grandfather was a gambler and so Papa right away, he had to be his own

boss. He just couldn't work under his father because my grandfather was just — lazy. My father worked hard. So my grandfather just the following year went to where my father was farming and lived with my father.

Then when we went to camp to Topaz, my grandfather, I remember he used to clean the grease traps and all the mess halls. And he would have this thing about six feet long with wire mesh to clean where the grease would go. And I still remember he would lean it against the barracks after he was done at night. Whenever you went in, I came outside. You did smell that grease trap. That was my grandpa. That was his job.

What happened to your grandmother?

I don't remember her. She passed away before WWII.

So your grandfather was alone?

Yes. And on my mother's side, I remember my grandmother and grandfather. But they went with my mother's older brother. They were with him. They were the flower growers. And they bought a property in East Palo Alto and built greenhouses. They had a full greenhouse to raise carnations. You need that in order to protect it from the cold. And then during the day, greenhouses, the glasses were sort of painted white to keep the sun glare from shining too brightly on the carnations. Because it couldn't be too hot, it would almost burn the carnations.

It seems like they're delicate.

To get the good size, you'd need to have the right temperature.

So since you were raised in Southern California, could you describe a typical day for you growing up before the war?

We were all four of us children born in Santa Barbara. The land that my father was mostly able to lease was always the hillside land. No well water, so what they did was plant peas. Peas was something you can plant the seed in the ground and it would stay in the ground for two, three weeks if there weren't any rain. And then the rains would come and germinate. But most

seeds, if you planted, you could if you have a backyard. So that's what they planted. Although there were tomatoes, too.

But I remember Papa talking about the hillside land. The only land they could lease because most people you would hear of “marginal land.” And that's the term they used for Japanese who weren't able to lease. But they still could do it, which is that they could make farmland out of nothing. That was the ingenuity and the hard work of Japanese. It's amazing how they were able to, just through experience of coming here and working maybe for another farmer.

What do you remember about when Pearl Harbor happened?

I don't remember much after Pearl Harbor. Next door to our ranch was an oil storage facility and a Japanese submarine, a two man sub with a ship was moored off the coast. It came near the shore and lobbed shells into this oil storage facility. So what happened was the Japanese submarine two man sub, they just lobbed play shells. They didn't explode or anything, but they wanted to scare the American people on the coastline of California. It's hard to envision reading articles about cars that were screaming out of Los Angeles to leave because there were threats or rumors of airplanes coming to bomb Los Angeles.

And this happened? This submarine lobbing these shells. That actually happened, though?

It happened.

I've never heard of this.

Well, the American government never told people about it. They didn't want to scare — these armaments didn't explode. Well, I don't know. Some maybe exploded, but I call them “play shells” because they wanted to scare the American people. A two man sub isn't going to do much. But in order to get from where the ship was moored off the coast, maybe five, ten miles out, they had to traverse underwater because a rowboat would be spotted right away. And during that time, there were spotters along the coast. I met

somebody whose father was a spotter.

And so almost immediately we had to move away inland. My father had two older sisters who lived in Centerville, which is now Fremont and they owned property, otherwise we would've had no place to go. And right around the first week in May, we went to Tanforan in 1942. So that would have been making me five years old. My younger sister, Satoko, about three and a half. My next youngest brother was about two and a half. And my youngest brother was only six months old when we entered. So my poor mother must've had it so terribly hard.

Did your parents ever have any conversations with you or your siblings about what was happening?

Well, see, my mother and father spoke Japanese at home. But when my mother spoke to us, maybe before the war or camp, she might have spoken to us in Japanese because Papa insisted on us speaking Japanese. But once we were in camp, it was the Japanese way. "Nihogno hanishitaku nakata." (Didn't want to speak Japanese). Pound your fist on the top of the table "No, no." My father had a loud voice, so I remember coming out of camp and if we went somewhere, I would tell Papa, "Not too loud." I didn't want people to know we were Japanese.

So that's how much language interrupted our whole way of life. Our cultural being. It's hard to understand. And I have met [people] at these pilgrimages. A five year old kid who is playing his father came to get him and the father talked to him in Japanese. He was embarrassed to hear Japanese from his father. And he went back later and told his father, "Don't talk to me in Japanese when you come after me in front of my friends." I've never heard that before. And you can't imagine somebody being that [way] about our language, being self-conscious, embarrassed. But, you know, it's funny. I don't think about it anymore now. Now it's almost a gift. Speak multiple languages, they look at it very differently. It's a benefit versus a detriment.

What do you remember about Tanforan? What were your first

impressions?

Hardly [any]. We were there for only three, four months. But I remember parts of Topaz.

What do you remember about Topaz? Did your parents work in camp?

My father was a cook. We went there in October of ‘42. So the summer of ‘43, my uncle was farming in Montana. So my father went to work there, too. But having four kids at home, he couldn't leave, you know, stay away for too long. But also, there was a way of saving money, making money, because once we came out of camp, we found the place to farm and to pull the trees out, hire people. He needed the money. And my father had a very friendly person who looked after his tractor farm. And we had a passenger car, ‘37 Ford. Mama would drive us to drive-in theaters and stuff. Still remember.

So all of your possessions were safe?

Somebody looked after it. You hear so many stories of people losing things because they were vandalized, or stolen. My father was so lucky.

Do you remember coming back after Topaz?

Completely. I remember. My father, we had this tractor and he would do tractor work for all of these flower growers. There was a friend of ours who grew orchids. He had a glasshouse. So Papa had very good friends from the Block 16 of Topaz who settled in Walnut Creek. So Papa right away said, “Oh, you should go work for these Okumuras, who have a house for you to stay in and work in.” They would grow this variety of flowers, orchids were quite hard to grow. It wasn't quite warm enough. Winters would be too cold for orchids they were grown mostly in Hawaii or other places.

I had two older sisters who owned property and one owned the grocery store. And as soon as we came out of camp, they bought a grocery store in Mountain View called Capsule City Market. People who lived in Mountain View would know it because they sold Japanese goods [in] 1946, ‘47. When

we were farming in Palo Alto, they bought the store.

Did you experience any kind of backlash coming back or was it more or less welcoming?

Palo Alto is a place where it was hard to find or rent homes or buy homes in certain areas. But because we found this piece of property right next door to Stanford University, part of where Stanford Industrial Park became. Most of our neighbors, we found one 20 acre piece of land, we farmed it for two years and then he wanted to sell it. And so we found another 20 acre piece of land. So for us to find these land where you have to pull out the trees or clearing and things that you have to do, there's a lot of hard work preparing land to just actually really farm. Somebody was maybe farming it, but it was haphazard. It wasn't really a farm. And when Papa wanted to grow something, he wanted to make sure he grew it right. He was a true Issei. And then we found a place to farm in San Jose.

And you owned that land?

That we bought.

Wow. So that must have felt good for your parents to finally own land.

We moved into a brand new house after living in these shacks. That was on the property. The house wasn't lived in for ten years, but we had to make it livable. And so Papa's older sister came to help us and Papa's next oldest sister's sons helped us. When they bought the grocery store, sons would take time when Papa needed somebody to drive his truck. We raised beans so they were canning beans. So we had to drive to the cannery to deliver the beans every afternoon or early evening.

So he worked all the way 'til my brother bought a place out in San Martin. My father would go there every day to plant tomatoes. And that was his specialty. We farmed quite a bit of acreage of tomatoes. And so once we incorporated, we again sponsored this [JAMsj's rotating exhibit sponsored by Mune Farms] for me to honor my brother because without him, you know, everybody left the farm. Kin wanted to stay and become the farmer.

And when did you sell the property?

We just leased the land first. And then on Morrill Road we bought it in 1950 and sold it in ‘67. And then we had to sell it to buy this place where we strictly built a packing shed for the tomatoes. And then we had to build these two big coolers 30 feet by 40 feet. We had to pre-cool the tomatoes to be shipped back east. So we had a broker who sold our tomatoes. In fact, people would say, “You became the biggest tomato farmers in Santa Clara County.” Sizing machines was the number one thing we had to have. We couldn't hand size it anymore.

So that was another reason why I wanted to do this, for Kin's sake, who was dying of mesothelioma. We had this opening in February and Kin couldn't come. It was too cold, he was quite frail. And he died in August.

But he knew of the impact of his story and the family name.

Oh yeah, at that opening, I wanted to talk about Kin. When my brother decided that he was going to be the true farmer and for my youngest brother and myself to join, I think my father was so happy.

Were you closest with him?

You know, we weren't really. We had such different attitudes. I became a traveler. When I left one summer, because my brother-in-law joined the farm, we didn’t get along. So it was a good excuse. So I took off for Europe and I was gone for four months. I had a three month Eurail pass to spend time in England. So when I came home in September, Kin picked me up at the airport. That was one of the last years, and in ‘76 [he] bought a nursery. It's in Union City now. But it was the Frank Ogawa nursery who became mayor of Oakland. That was his nursery. He did not work that hard to maintain and run a nursery. So Kin expanded it and he actually he started two businesses. And I now think about, gosh. How hard he worked, how he was just good about, you know, the Nikkeis or Niseis. They worked hard.

And he's never talked about money. But because I had no place to stay. So when I was going through Mexico, I was there for about four or five months.

But I came home just before Christmas because Kin was dying of mesothelioma. And so my niece wanted somebody to stay in her house. She has a little one room granny's house in the back. Well then Kin said, "Come and live with us." I said, "Kin. You know, I want to pay you rent." First time I heard him say "I have a lot of money. You don't have to." But I miss especially the last four months when Kin was sick.

Do you get nostalgic sometimes to see that nothing here in San Jose is farmland?

I didn't mind leaving the farm after 40 years. You work on a farm, you're sort of glad to be like this (*makes hand dusting gesture*). Dusting your hands off to that hard work.

And how about your parents — did they pass away by the time the redress was given out?

My father died in 2001, three months before 9/11. He lived till he was 97.

So he received his apology and redress. Do you remember his reaction to that?

Oh, he was so happy. He kept asking me. I was sort of working on the redress or reparations committee. I said, "Papa, we'll get it. We'll get it." He couldn't believe it. And finally, the day we received news of President Reagan signing the apology letter and they had a function at the Issei Memorial building right next door. And Papa was the only Issei there. I was so proud of him. "Papa, let's go. We're gonna celebrate because I told you, Papa, we're gonna get the money."

Papa and Mama never talked of any bitterness of camp. Never talked down about the white people. But he always said, "Just work harder than them and you'll be better than them, mentally."

California State Library
FOUNDED 1850
PRESERVING OUR HERITAGE, SHAPING OUR FUTURE

This interview was made possible by the Japanese American Museum of San Jose and a grant from the California Civil Liberties Program.